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In the first manuscript, preference and interest studies are examined for the purpose of determining the issues involved in guiding educational professionals in the selection of books for free reading in the classroom and the library. Studies which examined books that children actually read rather than studies investigating topics children might want to read about, were more apt to give an accurate view of children's reading interests. Accessibility in terms of language and setting was found to be one determinate of reading interest. Identification with characters was another major indicator of children's reading engagement. The second manuscript notes that the state book award programs exist to encourage the recreational reading of the best in contemporary children's literature. Although adults generally create the book award list of nominees, children who have read a minimum number of the books may vote for their favorite. The study assumed that books winning more than 4 different state book awards have elicited a high level of interest by child readers. A list of the 1990-2000 winners of 44 state book award programs, concentrating on the category that included the elementary years, was compiled. Analysis of the data indicated that 7 authors won more than 39% of the awards given during that period. Reading levels for the books winning more than 4 awards averaged fifth grade, zero months. Analyzing the content of the top 10 titles, which had won 28% of the total number of awards, supported the research on children's reading interests. This research indicates that children are interested in books that are accessible in setting and language and provide a character with whom the children can easily identify either on a superficial or developmental level. Contains a total of 33 references, and 2 figures and a table of data. An appendix lists 19 works of children's literature cited. (Author/RS)

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Children's Reading Interests and the State Book Award Programs.

by Mary B. Nevil

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ACCEPTANCE

This paper, WHAT STATE BOOK AWARDS REVEAL ABOUT CHILDREN'S READING INTERESTS by MARY BRAYDEN NEVIL, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Specialist Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Specialist in the College of Education, Georgia State University.

The Specialist Advisory committee certifies that this research study has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty. The Dean of the College of Education concurs.

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ABSTRACT

CHILDREN'S READING INTERESTS IN RESEARCH AND THEORY:

A LITERATURE REVIEW

By

Mary B. Nevil

Preference and interest studies are examined for the purpose of determining the issues involved in guiding educational professionals in the selection of books for free reading in the classroom and the library. Studies which examined books that children actually read rather than studies investigating topics children might want to read about, were more apt to give an accurate view of children's reading interests. Accessibility in terms of language and setting was found to be one determinate of reading interest. Identification with characters was another major indicator of children's reading engagement.

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award list of nominees, children who have read a minimum number of the books may vote for their favorite. The study assumed that books winning more than four different state book awards have elicited a high level of interest by child readers. A list of the 1990-2000 winners of 44 state book award programs, concentrating on the category that included the middle elementary years, was compiled for the years. Analysis of the data indicated that seven authors won more than 39% of the awards given during that period. Reading levels (Fleish-Kincaid) for the books winning more than four awards averaged fifth grade, zero months. Analyzing the content of the top ten titles, which had won 28% of the total number of awards, supported the research on children's reading interests. This research indicates that children are interested in books that are accessible in setting and language and provide a character with whom the children can easily identify either on a superficial or developmental level.

CHILDREN'S READING INTERESTS AND THE STATE BOOK AWARD PROGRAMS

by

Mary B. Nevil

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for
The Degree of Specialist in Education in the Department
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MANUSCRIPT 1

CHILDREN'S READING INTERESTS IN RESEARCH AND THEORY: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The acquisition and consolidation of literacy skills is considered a primary function of the elementary years in childhood education. Students' success in literacy acquisition and interest in literature, not only predicts academic success, it frequently signifies success (Wolfson, Manning, & Manning, 1984). Decoding and achieving relative fluency in reading are fundamentals of the first three years of reading instruction while increasing comprehension, reading speed, and vocabulary building begin to take precedence in the later elementary years – grades four through six. How well students succeed in these skills has been linked through research to the amount of reading done by students and the development of good reading habits (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 1988; Watkins & Edwards, 1992).

One need only walk into an elementary school today to see the emphasis placed on reading promotion. These promotions include time set aside during the school day for free-choice reading such as DEAR – Drop Everything and Read or FRED – Free Reading Every Day. Library programs to promote reading abound and are considered among a library media specialist's main duties (AASL & AECT, 1998). Computerized reading programs such as Accelerated Reader, Scholastic's Reading Counts, and Electronic

Bookshelf have become ubiquitous. Reading promotions sponsored by commercial enterprises such as Pizza Hut's "Book It" program, Six Flags Amusement Park's "600 Minutes of Reading" and professional sports teams such as the Atlanta Hawks' "Fast Break for Reading", all foster the notion that more reading will lead to academic success.

Lifelong, avid readers, reflecting on what element sparked their love of reading, often refer to that one book, one author, or the discovery of a genre such as fantasy, which seized their imagination, resulting in "personal emotional investment" (Crago, 1993, p. 280). Promotions may be capable of providing some primary motivation for children to read, but it is the book itself that will satisfy and lead to further reading. Parents, librarians, and educators are primarily responsible for providing access to the books they so desperately want children to read. Visiting the public library and buying books for their children are major ways in which some parents can provide access to books. However, teachers and in particular a school's library media specialist are the adults responsible for providing access for all children. The decisions they make regarding the selection of books and their knowledge of appropriate material will shape both the quantity and quality of reading in a particular school.

Most library media specialists have had the experience of selecting a well-reviewed, critically acclaimed or prize winning book to watch it sit on the shelf, or recommending the book to children and receiving only lukewarm responses. Meanwhile, the Babysitters Club, Goosebumps, and other series books fly off the shelf. As professionals who provide, perhaps, the only access that many children have to free choice reading materials, media specialists must ask themselves *and* the children served, what books children want and like to read.

Purpose

The purpose of this review of the literature is to determine whether there exists, in research or theory, results or conclusions that could guide educational professionals in their selection of books for free choice reading in the classroom and the library. Articles have been selected that illustrate two different types of research on children's reading preferences and interests. These articles include both experimental research and theoretical writings and for the most part refer to children in the intermediate elementary years or between 9 and 12 in age, the period when reading habits become embedded. Excluded were articles in which research was conducted exclusively on a population for which data was not generalizable, such as readers with low reading scores on standardized tests, and research on specific genres of children's literature.

Review

Most of the research investigating what children want and like to read can be separated into two types of studies: the preference study and the interest study. The terms "interest" and "preference" however, are often used interchangeably which may lead to confusion. Summers and Lukasevich (1983) defined the preference study as one that "relates more to reading which might be done, while interests are inferred from what has actually been read" (p. 348). Spangler (1983) also recognized the possibility of confusion and succinctly described each type of research. Interest studies are descriptive, involving investigation as to books actually read by children. Instruments are usually in the form of checklists, rating scales or interviews, reading records, and journals. The results will yield lists of titles, ratings of genres, themes or content areas (Spangler). Thus, interest studies will provide information about what children are reading out of all that is accessible to them.

Preference Studies

Preference studies tend to be experimental in nature. Controls are used and variables such as age, sex, race, intelligence and readability are manipulated in order to explore the "causes of interest patterns" (Spangler, 1983, p. 877). The instrument of choice in the preference study is the hypothetical set of choices of real or fictitious titles or lists of topics. Subjects usually do not read books but "merely express their opinions based on carefully controlled information which isolates certain characteristics" (Spangler, p. 877). Preference studies result in predictions that can be used when setting up new choices, for example, selecting books to add to a collection.

Preference studies comprise the bulk of the research focused on determining the type of books children like to read. Starting as early as the 1920's these studies have used a variety of methods to ascertain literature preferences making it difficult to compare results (Monson & Sebesta, 1991). The validity and reliability of instruments have also been called into question (Hayes & Richgels, 1992; Worthy, J., Moorman, M., & Turner, M., 1999).

In the early 1980's the whole language reading movement and the practice of using authentic literature in the classroom was gaining momentum and produced a new surge of research in children's reading preferences with a tendency toward higher quality studies (Haynes & Richgels, 1992). The majority of preference studies ask subjects to rank their liking for a particular topic, content, or genre. Most preference studies conclude that certain subjects appeal to students at a particular age and that those subjects change as a child grows older (Monson & Sebesta, 1991).

Fisher (1988) conducted a preference study of third, fourth, and fifth graders using a reading preference survey developed by Bundy that displayed high validity and

reliability. The instrument used fictitious titles that corresponded with 11 categories of interest. Fisher's results confirmed previous research: boys and girls preferences were different with boys showing more interest in sports and science and girls indicating a greater preference for biography, crafts, jokes, fairytales, animals, and poetry. Fisher found "more similarity than differences between the interests of black and white children and between the grades" (p. 69). In this study there was some evidence to suggest that teachers may influence a class's enthusiasm for reading.

Haynes and Richgels (1992) point out that many studies have established that boys and girls reading preferences are not identical and girls' interests always differ in some respects from boys' interest profiles. However, the gender differences change over the decades, perhaps caused as much by the researchers' wording as by the subjects changing perceptions (Haynes & Richgels).

Harkrader and Moore (1997) found that fourth grade boys and girls prefer fiction to non-fiction, with girls' preference stronger. Girls had a strong preference for four of ten fiction categories (animal stories, mystery, adjustment, and historical fiction) while boys had a stronger preference for two (sports and science fiction). Both boys and girls had similar preferences for adventure and folk tales (Harkrader & Moore). This study also found that boys displayed a stronger preference for male main characters while girls preferred female main characters.

One of the major problems in analyzing the data from preference research is that there are seldom clear-cut categories. Often genre, subject matter, and topic overlap. This problem has been the focus of two reading preference studies, one a 1983 study by Summers and Lukasevich and the other by Haynes and Richgels in 1992.

Summers and Lukasevich (1983) recognized the inaccuracy inherent in employing

broad descriptive form and content themes such as humor, romance, biography, science, and geography to describe a reading preference. The authors used content as the major focus of theme categorization because they felt that content was generally considered to be the most important preference criterion (Summers & Lukasevich). The 14 representative content and form themes chosen were: adventure, history/geography, animals, children/family, sports, humor, science, poetry, fantasy, biography, travel, romance, nature study, and mystery. The researchers used these content and form themes to create a reading preference inventory using a paired comparison format. Factor analysis was the method of data interpretation.

Summers and Lukasevich (1983) found that

> intermediate children differed significantly in their preference for many of the book themes with strong similarity in preference indicated for a few themes and considerable variability emerging for the rest. The independent variables of sex, community, and grade level were found to differentially affect preference (p. 359).

For both male and female subjects in this study, the underlying factor most strongly preferred contained the themes of adventure, fantasy and mystery – the common denominator was excitement and thrills in reading (Summers & Lukesavich).

The Haynes and Richgel (1992) study also made use of factor. In their study of fourth graders' reading preferences, the authors did not redefine traditional fiction and non-fiction categories. The instrument used was a fictitious annotated titles inventory to examine children's preferences in 26 categories. The research yielded the finding that the top ranked factors for both boys and girls were similar and drew from traditional and modern fantasy, from realistic fiction about romance and adjustment, from historical fiction, and from scientific items, and from biographies. Girls' factors indicated a greater distinction made between fiction and non-fiction while boys' preferences were more

diverse than girls'. Haynes and Richgels concluded with the concept on which Summers and Lukesavitch based their methodology, namely that "content better explains children's expressed literature preferences than do some of the classification schemes that teachers, librarians, and researchers have typically used" (Haynes & Richgels, p. 217). In Haynes and Richgels' study, the methodology of the research itself led to the insight that children do not treat genre as indivisible and that traditional genre categories are too monolithic. Teachers, librarians, and researchers might better ask children

> what they would like to read rather than to ask whether they would like to read a mystery, a fantasy, an animal book or a biography. Being responsive to the content of books that children say they have enjoyed in the past may enable the librarian or teacher to provide them with additional materials that they might find interesting in the future. (Haynes & Richgels, p. 218)

The research of Summers and Lukesavich (1983) and Haynes and Richgels (1992), both sophisticated preference studies, suggest that the best way to discover what kind of books children enjoy reading is to inquire about content.

Interest Studies

Interest studies, because they focus on reading habits and the books that children have actually read, or say they have read, provide a complementary perspective. If preference studies actually predict the type of reading children might engage in, interest studies should confirm those predictions. Most researchers who conduct interest studies are not simply interested in generating lists of titles but hope to learn more about how students select the books they read. Wendelin and Zinck (1983), in their survey of 688 fifth through eighth grade students, discovered that students rely more heavily on peer rather than teacher recommendation, prefer paperbacks, and will read additional books written by authors whose books they have enjoyed. Movies and television also prompted

the reading of novelizations or the original books (Wendelin & Zinck). Factors important in selecting a book to read were length, print, cover, title, and content of the first page. In the area of interest, about one third of the students surveyed said mysteries were the type of book they most liked to read. However, of the books named in the survey at least 12 times as having been read lately and liked, none was a mystery (Wendelin & Zinck). This confirms Carter's (1976) finding that students' "expressed interests did not reflect their reading interests" (p. 4).

Olson (1984) also found that "there is no significant tendency for students to choose books with their stated interest areas in a free choice" (p. 10) but that "did not mean that that they did not choose books of interest" (p. 11). Olson's research sought "to determine the relationship between the appropriateness of book choices from the school library made by grade six students and sex, reading ability level and the choice within interest areas" (p. 8). In the area of reading ability and book choices, Olson's research revealed that students reading above grade level tend to choose books below their ability and those reading below grade level tended to choose books above their ability. Those students reading on grade level choose books neither above nor below their reading ability (Olson). These results provide further reason to investigate the actual book choices made by children and what the content of those books might say about children's reading interests.

Librarians and educators depend upon reviewing sources and the opinion of critics when selecting books for the library media center or for classroom collections. Does a reviewer's recommendation or critical acclaim in the form of a prestigious award guarantee the popularity of a book with the child reader? Several studies indicate that often children's books that are judged to be of high literary merit do not prove to be

particularly popular with children. Nilsen, Peterson, and Searfoss (1980) found a negative correlation between books that garnered praise from the critics and the reaction of children to those books. In their study, a list was compiled from critically acclaimed children's books and titles supplied by a media specialist that were known to be well liked. The list was then given to the children's librarians at ten branches of the Phoenix Public Library. The librarians were asked to rate each book as to how it was generally received by children. In general, the critics' choices fell below the other books in popularity (Nilsen, et al.).

Nilsen et al. (1980) discovered that the books favored by critics but rejected by children were not of any particular genre but that there seemed to be a verbal barrier that made engagement difficult for children. Books that depended on the evocation of mood without a clear plot did not fare well with children. Lacking background information also proved an obstacle to children. Books set in a foreign country ended up on the bottom of the popularity list as did books featuring characters from minority groups.

Popular books in this study all exhibited two characteristics: they were verbally engaging and they rang true on a behavioral level (Nilsen et al., 1980). In other words the books were easy to read and the reader could identify with the characters. Obviously the adult reviewers and critics are reading at a more sophisticated level, one at which few of the books' intended audience find recreational reading enjoyable or are capable of sustaining without adult help.

Another study by Carter and Harris (1981) compared critics' choices with those of children. School Library Journal's "Best Books 1980" and Booklist's "Children's Reviewers' Choice 1980" were combined into a list which was compared with the International Reading Association's Children's Choices. The Children's Choice is a list

of one hundred books compiled through a selection process in which children across the nation evaluate more than five hundred juvenile books published in a particular year. The list includes both fiction and non-fiction books divided by age appropriateness. The study focused on the books that upper grade students in grades six through eight, found on both lists. In general, "the students in the upper grades . . . were not impressed with the books favored by the professionals" (Carter & Harris, p. 56). Few of the books chosen by the students had also been selected by the critics. Neither were the professional reviewers impressed with the students' choices. The critics did predict that 25% of the Children's Choices would be popular despite a less than enthusiastic endorsement.

In 1994, Allison conducted a study in which Charlottesville, Virginia children's book choices in a public library were compared with the books on the Children's Choice lists from 1975 to 1994. When the books selected by children and the Children's Choice books were sorted by genre and category, there was little correspondence across categories. Charlottesville area children chose non-fiction, information books most frequently with contemporary realistic fiction a distant second. Children stated that entertainment value and knowledge acquisition were the primary reasons for choosing particular books (Allison, 1994).

What is apparent from these studies is that there is little congruity between the opinions of children and the evaluation of professionals about the merits of certain children's books.

> When children endorse a book, they simply mean it is the kind of book they like to read. When professional reviewers endorse a juvenile title, they tend to focus on literary aspects, favoring the kinds of books they think children should read. (Carter & Harris, 1981, p. 55)

If the media specialist and the teacher cannot completely trust the reviewer or the

critic to identify titles that will appeal to children and if what children say they are interested in reading does not correlate with what they end up reading, what reasonable assumptions might be used in selecting books for children? Perhaps, the answer might be found in asking "why children read certain things and not others" (Schlager, 1978, p. 136).

The Nilsen et al. (1980) study, described above, used the phrases "verbally engaging" and "ring true on a behavioral level" to describe the books most often sought out and enjoyed by children. Crago (1993) refined these attributes and suggested reasons for the popularity of certain children's authors such as Blyton, Dahl, and Blume. Their popularity can

> be accounted for on the basis of an interaction between a set of formal qualities (which for the present we might collectively label *accessibility*) and a set of developmentally appropriate themes. If a narrative embodies a theme which is broadly meaningful to readers of a certain level of psycosocial maturity – and does so in accessible language – then that narrative will be read and enjoyed, reread perhaps, and recommended to friends. This is a statement about what I call *lowest common-denominator meaning*, in which the meaning created by individuals in response to a text largely coincides with meanings promoted and validated by the whole culture in which that individual lives. (p. 279)

Schlager (1978) conducted a study that examined the relationship between the behavioral characteristics of middle childhood and the frequency of circulation of Newbery Award books over a three-year period. Schlager analyzed those books with the highest and lowest circulation to determine if there was a correlation between behavioral characteristics of middle childhood as identified by Jean Piaget and Eric Ericson and the type of Newbery winner that was widely read. Schlager found a high level of correlation between the widely circulated Newbery books and several of Piaget's and Ericson's characteristics. These characteristics were identified as reality

orientation (the need to handle reality situations independently), cognitive conceit (the child feels smarter than adults), task orientation (the ability to plan and execute), and the development of decision making skills (discerning what can and cannot be controlled in the environment). Schlager concluded that even "well-written books with good plots and story-lines, but lacking in the developmental perception of middle childhood, remain basically unappealing to the seven to twelve year old" (p. 141). The main characters in the most popular children's fiction will by their actions and attitudes invite the child's identification with them and generate interest in the unfolding of the story (Schlager).

Nodelman (1981), in the essay "How Typical Children Read Typical Books", criticized the process of children's identification with characters. Nodelman suggested that "in offering children story after story which demands identification, we teach them that one understands stories precisely by identifying . . . that reading is primarily a matter of self-recognition" (p. 181). Nodelman contended that much written for children substitutes typicality for the detail and subtlety that informs better writing for children. Pointing out that identification often operates on a superficial, manipulative level, Nodelman (1984) theorized that good writing for children is often subversive in that it draws the child into the wider world and

> forces the reader's attention away from himself; in enjoying something clearly different from what he is already familiar with, he comes to understand that he shares a world with other people. . . and that other people are as interesting in their way as he is himself in his. (p. 184)

Conclusion

The literature concerning children's reading interests in the elementary grades is one of contradiction. Studies investigating reading preferences indicate the types of

books children say they would enjoy reading. Interest research tells us that children do not necessarily read what they say would interest them in preference studies. Interest studies indicate that children reject some of the books critics select while enjoying others. Studies show that the reader identification with characters is essential to engaged reading, while theorists suggest that encouraging children to identify will restrict the range and quality of literature available to them. Does the body of research lead to the conclusion that children's reading interests are individual and idiosyncratic or that they are generalizable and predictable?

Reading interest and enjoyment are reciprocal and involve an individual child in the content of a specific book. Just as children exhibit similar behavioral characteristics at certain ages, it is hard to disregard the tendency of whole groups of children to enjoy certain authors, themes, and book series. Nilsen et al. (1980), Schlager (1978), and Crago (1993) offer insights that are useful for those to whom children's reading interests are most important – children, teachers, library media specialists, and parents.

The main characteristics that are essential to reading interest are accessibility and identification. Accessibility refers to readability, style, and content issues such as setting and character. Identification issues pertain to the interaction of plot and character. Identification may initiate the relationship of interest and enjoyment at the lowest common denominator, in which the main character exists in a void of "typicalness" (Nodelman). In Schlager's view, however, children identify with main characters who are depicted as deeply individual while engaging in behavior that rings true developmentally. These differences in depth of identification help explain the popularity of Goosebumps or the Babysitters Club along with certain award winners of high literary merit.

In reviewing the literature in this area, the most profitable paths of investigation are the interest studies, which examine the books children are actually reading. One line of investigation involves analyzing specific books that thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of children, have enjoyed and most of which display literary merit. Each year, 47 of the 50 states produce a state book award winner, often in several age categories. These book award winners are chosen through a voting process by which children, who have read a number of the nominated selections, select their favorite. Unlike the Children's Choices nominees, which are selected by publishers from among books published during a given year, the state award nominees are usually selected by committee after reviewing the nominations of parents, educators, and children. The nominees are not limited to a specific year and the process lends itself to the inclusion of the popular as well as the literary book selection. The data generated by the nomination and selection of state book award winners appears to be the type of information that would consolidate and verify or negate the insights gleaned from interest studies

Educators interested in selecting books of literary merit that middle elementary students will read and enjoy must be cognizant of the inportance of accessibility and identification. They also must read widely in children's literature, attuned to individual interests and preferences among their students. Most importantly, educators must seek out and employ specific strategies in order to help students overcome obstacles related to accessibility and identification and so enlarge the reading arena for elementary boys and girls.

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MANUSCRIPT 2

WHAT STATE BOOKS REVEAL ABOUT CHILDREN'S READING INTERESTS

Introduction

The promotion of state book award nominees often plays a significant role in library media center reading programs at the elementary level. Forty-seven states maintain a state book award program with 33 of them initiated in the 1970's and 1980's. The oldest state program is the Pacific Northwest Young Reader's Choice Awards, which chose its first winner in 1940. That award program includes Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington as well as Alberta and British Columbia, Canada. The Kansas, Georgia, Hawaii, Oklahoma, and Vermont programs have also been in existence for 30 years or more (Children's Book Council, 1996).

With only a few exceptions, each state program is conducted along the following general format. A committee, which may be composed of teachers, library media specialists, members of state library associations, and professional reading organizations, receives book nominations from teachers, parents, students and community members. From the nominations, the committee selects between 10 and 20 books as that year's slate of state books. The general criteria for nomination are similar for all committees: to provide children with a list of some of the best contemporary literature written for their age level. Nominees usually must have been published within the past five years and each committee attempts to provide a list that is diverse in genre, culture, and gender appeal. Once the list of nominees is made public, it is often up to individual teachers and library media specialist to determine how best, if at all, to administer the program. Many states programs provide promotional material, teaching activities, and other suggestions for

implementing the program. Students are usually required to read at least four of the nominees in order to participate in voting for their favorite. Hundreds of thousands of votes are tallied across the country for each program and state winners are usually announced in late spring. Many state book award programs include several divisions such as picture books, intermediate (grades 4 through 8), and young adult selections (The Children's Book Council, 1996).

The wealth of data available to the interested investigator is impressive given the length of time state book award programs have existed, the number, diversity, and quality standards of nominated books, and the sheer volume of children involved in the state programs. Some research has focused on the implementing of the award programs, but little has been published on the nature of the award winning books. The purpose of this article is to look closely at the award winners of the years 1990-2000 to determine whether the winning books, chosen by children, support what research suggests are children's reading interests.

The peak years for children's reading tends to be in middle childhood. For that reason, this inquiry will be confined to the state award category that includes the intermediate grades 4 through 6. In some award programs the category extends through grade 8. The majority of children in this sample are usually between 8 and 12 years old and range in reading skills from the newly fluent to the sophisticated, critical reader.

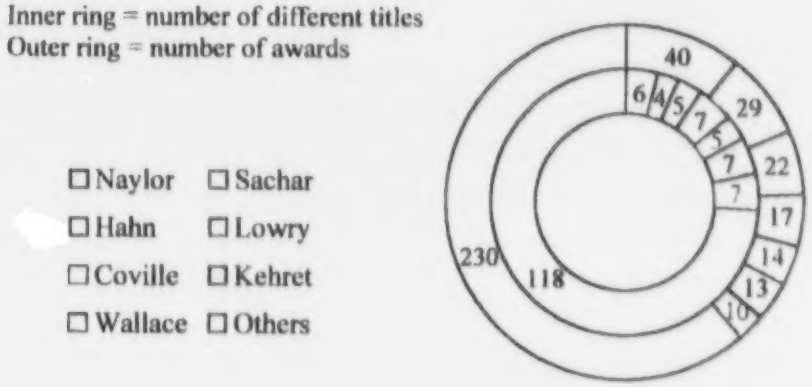
A database was constructed to hold details and titles of each state's book award winners for the period and a spreadsheet was used to calculate the number of awards a book had won. The data was assembled from information published in Children's Books: Awards & Prizes (Children's Book Council, Inc., 1996) and through the WWW site Awards for Children's and YA Literature by State (Smith, 2000). Information was

available from 44 state book award programs. Washington was represented twice, once as a member of the Pacific Northwest Award and once in the Sasquatch Award, which was inaugurated in 1998. Louisiana's first award was in 1999. Alabama's and West Virginia's data was incomplete with only the 1990-1995 award winners available, while New York and Ohio are on a biennial schedule.

Quantitative Results

During the 11-year period under investigation and for which data was available, 375 state book awards were presented to authors. These awards represented 156 different titles. Of the 375 awards presented, fully 39%, 145 awards, went to seven authors: Phyllis Reynolds Naylor (40), Louis Sachar (29), Mary Downing Hahn (22), Lois Lowry (17), Bruce Coville (14), Peggy Kehret (13), and Bill Wallace (10) Of the 156 different winning titles, these seven authors wrote almost one-quarter, 38 titles. With the exception of Kehret and Wallace, the authors all have two or more titles that have won four or more awards. (See figure 1)

Figure 1 Ratio of Number of Awards Won to Number of Winning Titles



Kehret and Wallace tied for the most winning titles of this group of writers, 7 each, but neither author had a book that won more than three book awards. One might speculate on

the meaning of this data, but it is clear that the child readers preferred certain authors and that these authors are fairly predictable in terms of style and genre type. Research indicates that children will read additional books written by authors whose books they have enjoyed (Wendelin & Zinck, 1983). Prolific authors whose books have come to the attention of nominating committees previously and whose previous books are known by children, have a better chance of both being nominated by adults and being read by the children who cast the votes. (See table 1)

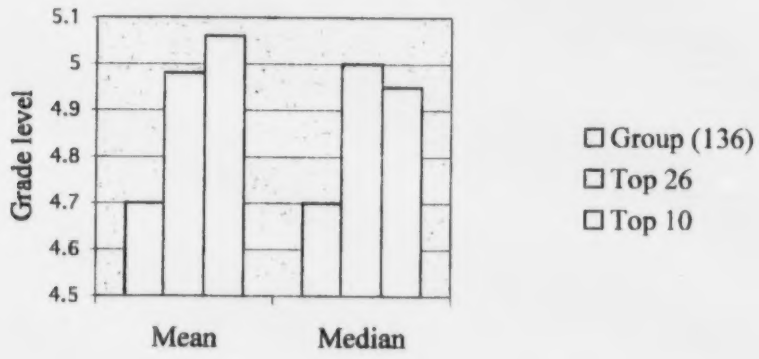
Table 1

Number of awards won by 26 most popular books

Title	Author	# of Awards
Shiloh	Phyllis Reynolds Naylor	22
There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom	Louis Sachar	17
Maniac Magee	Jerry Spinelli	12
Best School Year Ever	Barbara Robinson	11
Frindle	Andrew Clements	10
Mick Harte was Here	Barbara Park	10
Time for Andrew	Mary Downing Hahn	9
Fudge-a-Mania	Judy Blume	9
Matilda	Roald Dahl	8
The Doll in the Garden	Mary Downing Hahn	7
Shiloh Season	Phyllis Reynolds Naylor	6
Saving Shiloh	Phyllis Reynolds Naylor	5
Hatchett	Gary Paulson	5
My Teacher is an Alien	Bruce Coville	5
Number the Stars	Lois Lowry	5
Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone	J. K. Rowling	5
Crash	Jerry Spinelli	4
Wayside School is Falling Down	Louis Sachar	4
Wayside School Gets a Little Stranger	Louis Sachar	4
All About Sam	Lois Lowry	4
Fudge	Charlotte Graeber	4
The Giver	Lois Lowry	4
Ghost of Mercy Manor	Betty Wren Wright	4
Boys Start the War	Phyllis Reynolds Naylor	4
Jeremy Thatcher, Dragon Hatcher	Bruce Coville	4
Wait 'til Helen Comes	Mary Downing Hahn	4

Another area of interest was the readability of the winning books. Of the 156 book award winners, the reading levels for 136 of the titles were available through the use the Accelerated Reader Program's ARTitleFinder (Advantage Learning, 1999). Advantage Learning uses the Fleisch-Kincaid reading index to determine readibiltiy levels. The mean and median reading level for the entire group was 4.7 (4^{th} grade, 7^{th} month) with a range of 2.1 to 7.5. The twenty-six books that won four or more state book awards had a mean readability of 4.98 and a median of 5.0. The readability range was from 3.3 to 5.7. The ten most honored books had a readibility range of 4.6 to 5.7, with a median of 4.95. (see figure 2) This readability data indicates a relatively stable level for an average child's reading skills at the beginning of 5th grade.

Figure 2 Readibility of State Book Award Winners



Olson (1984), in a study of students' reading interests, found that students reading above grade level tend to choose books below their ability and those reading below grade level tended to choose books above their ability, while those reading on grade level choose books neither above nor below their reading ability (Olson, 1984). The readability data from the state book intermediate level awards bears out this observation in that a

reading level of 5.0 would be somewhat of a stretch for the average fourth grader reader, about on target for most average fifth graders, and somewhat below their ability for average sixth graders.

Qualitative Results

Children's recreational reading habits are never far from the library media specialists' minds as they plan promotions, help children select reading material, and develop collections. Helping children engage in reading that is interesting and enjoyable is a primary objective. One requirement for engaged reading for children, according to Nilsen, Peterson, and Searfoss (1980), is a setting familiar enough that children do not struggle with lack of background. In foreign settings, children have difficulty discerning whether a character's behavior "rings true." The patterns evident on the list of 26 most popular state award books again confirm research on children's reading interests. Number the Stars (Lowry, 1989) is the only representative of historical fiction and the only foreign locations are Denmark in Number the Stars, and England in Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone (1998), and Matilda (1990). Although in the latter two, Hogwart's school and Crunchen Hall Primary School, one a fantasy and the other an exaggeration, are the true locations.

Minorities face a similar fate. No major character in any of the listed books is a minority. In fact, only two books of the 156 winning titles feature a minority, The Watsons Go to Birmingham (1995), which won New Mexico's 2000 State Book Award and Mayfield Crossing (1993), which won Georgia's award in 1995.

Nilsen et al. (1980) also found a negative correlation between books that garnered praise from the critics and the reaction of children to those books. In analyzing the entire list of winners and this top 26 list, it is evident that children seldom select critically

acclaimed children's literature as their favorites in this age range. Only one Boston Globe/Hornbook Award winner was represented on the top 10 list of state book award winners, Maniac Magee (1990) by Jerry Spinelli (The Horn Book, Inc., 2000). Two other Globe/Hornbook winners appeared on the complete list: Avi's Poppy (1995), which won two awards, and Sachar's Holes (1998), which won three awards.

In the first half of the decade, the Newbery Awards were more frequently represented on top 26 list of state book award winners than the Boston Globe/Hornbook winners (ALA, 2000). Shiloh (Reynolds, 1991), the book that has won more state book awards than any other, was awarded the Newbery in 1992, and Maniac Magee (Spinelli, 1990) in 1991. Number the Stars and The Giver (Lowry, 1993) were awarded the Newbery in 1990 and 1994 respectively. In 1999, the Newbery was awarded to Holes. In the final count, only 4 of the 20 books that won the Boston Globe/Hornbook or the Newbery Award during the years 1990-2000 ended up on the list of the 26 books winning four or more awards. Only 6 Boston Globe/Hornbook or Newbery award winners are represented on the entire list of 156 winners for the decade. With a one or two year time lag between announcing the winners of these two critical awards and nomination to the various state book lists, additional winners were sought but not found in the Boston Globe/Hornbook and Newbery awards for 1988 and 1989.

It would be easy to dismiss this negative correlation if the state award nominees were chosen by children themselves and included books from series such as Goosebumps or Babysitters Club, but this is not the case. Many winners of critical award winners are included in the nominations and the lists themselves are assembled by professionals working in the field of children's' literature. Carter and Harris (1981) offer a simple explanation:

> When children endorse a book, they simply mean it is the kind of book they like to read. When professional reviewers endorse a juvenile title, they tend to focus on literary aspects, favoring the kinds of books they think children should read. (p. 55)

Storey (1987) approached the issue of popularity versus literary value in regard to Nebraska's Golden Sower State Book Award program. Storey found that although most media specialists felt that students were not employing artistic/literary merit in voting for books, neither did the media specialists regard the Golden Sower Award simply as a popularity contest. Most survey respondants saw the Nebraska Book Award process as a *literature* experience in all its many facets. Accordingly, the list of the 26 most awarded books reveals a range of books from the verbally engaging page turner to some that are considered among the best that children's literature has to offer, indicating that literary merit doesn't necessarily make a book unpopular.

Schlager (1978) provided a useful developmental model for looking at children's literature choices. Schlager theorized that books in which characters deal with the same developmental struggles as the child reader are appealing to children, while those books, however well regarded by adults, that do not incorporate the specific developmental challenges of middle childhood, will be considerably less appealing. Using Erik Erikson's theory that children in the fourth stage of human development (ages 7 to 12) must develop a sense of industry and acquire the skills necessary to succeed within their culture (Erikson, 1950). Schlager selected several challenges with which children in this age group struggle. These challenges center around reality orientation (the need to handle reality situations independently), cognitive conceit (the child feels smarter than adults), task orientation (the ability to plan and execute), and decision making skills (discerning what can and cannot be controlled in the environment).

How well do the state book award winners conform to this theory? Interestingly, Shiloh (Reynolds, 1990) and There's a Boy in the Girls Bathroom (Sachar, 1987), the two most popular state books during the period of this study, address the primary challenge of Erickson's fourth stage, industry vs. inferiority, from opposite perspectives.

Examining Naylor's Shiloh, (1990) from the Erikson/Schlager viewpoint, one can readily see all four challenges of middle childhood worked out in plot and character. Eleven year old Marty realizes he will not receive any help from his father in attempting to acquire a mistreated beagle from his mean neighbor, Judd. The story examines Marty's fears and anger as he struggles with issues of love, respect, and justice.

Shiloh's plot centers on Marty's plan to hide Shiloh, to get food for him and create a safe place for Shiloh to live. In many respects Shiloh is a survival story in which reality and task orientation are crucial. Marty must also come to terms with his father's adult perspective, which is grounded in the rule of law. Marty's father does empathize with Marty's emotional attachment and need to protect the dog from mistreatment, but realizes that nothing will be gained in antagonizing a neighbor. Marty justifies his deceit in hiding Shiloh and lying to his parents, by his assurance that he, alone, knows what is best for the dog. He even calls upon a higher authority in his turmoil.

> "Jesus," I whisper finally, "which you want me to do? Be one hundred percent honest and carry that dog back to Judd so that one of your creatures can be kicked and starved all over again, or keep him here and fatten him up to glorify your creation?" (Naylor, 1991, p. 57)

When Shiloh is mauled by another dog, Marty must face the fact that he cannot control Shiloh's environment or avoid the consequences of his actions. However, when he witnesses Judd kill a deer out of season, Marty realizes that he can strike a bargain with Judd and buy the dog. Ironically, Marty uses the threat of the law to get that which

had been denied him by law, and this decision is based on what he senses he can control, a deal. Although the rural West Virginia setting for Shiloh might seem far removed from many readers' experience, Marty's consciousness is the true setting and the plot gathers around the concept of industry as Marty navigates a crisis of conscience with the developmental equipment of middle childhood.

Sachar approaches middle childhood from the inferiority side of the developmental equation in his book, There's a Boy in the Girl's Bathroom (1987). Bradley Chalkers, troubled fifth grader, is miserably failing all Erikson's developmental tasks. Bradley's fantasy play with his collection of miniature animals suggests that reality is not his comfort zone. His academic and social ineptitude are failures of task orientation and decision making. His relationship with his parents and teacher is distant and negative, giving him little opportunity to feel smarter or more competent than they. Bradley's failure forces him to strike back from his position of inferiority and maintain his identity as the worst boy in school. When a new kid, Jeff, and a new counselor, Carla, approach Bradley, their unexpected friendship heightens Bradley's awareness that change is possible as he begins to take small steps from inferiority to industry, keeping a friendship, completing a homework assignment, attending a birthday party.

While Shiloh is narrated in the first person, There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom is told from Bradley's point of view but not in his voice. This enables the reader to identify with Bradley but also to pull back when his dilemma hits too close to home, or to laugh at his misinterpretations and ineptitude. Sachar is an expert in the use of what could be called the "breezy" writing style that characterizes many of the top award winning books. This style combines conversation with confession, often in the first person, creating a verbal engagement that is appealing to children. Fudge-a-mania (Blume, 1990),

The Best School Year Ever (Robinson, 1994), and Mick Hart Was Here (Park, 1995), along with Sachar's Wayside School books (1989, 1995), are good examples of a writing style that encourages verbal engagement and "rings true" to children.

The remaining books on the top 10 list adhere to Schlager's theory, with a greater or lesser emphasis on one of the developmental tasks. The cognitive conceit is the driving force behind Frindle and Matilda, while task orientation and decision making drive the two ghost stories by Mary Downing Hahn--Time for Andrew (1994) and The Doll in the Garden (1989).

The most enigmatic book on the list is Spinelli's Maniac Magee (1990), one of the few books on which both critics and children agreed. Written as a tall tale/moral fable, the reader is drawn in by the style and episodic nature of the narrative. Jeffrey Magee is a homeless orphan and gifted athlete adrift in a world of ignorance and racism. His quest is for a home and family. The issues raised in Maniac Magee, homelessness, racism, illiteracy, cruelty to children, and death, are not strangers to children's fiction, but their inclusion en masse in this novel serves a particular purpose. While the cognitive conceit is by far the most employed developmental issue evident in the state book award winners, Jeffrey Magee does not struggle with the feeling that he is smarter and more knowledgeable that adults, because as a larger than life character, he is! In identifying with Maniac Magee as a tall tale hero, the child reader engages in the cognitive conceit without recognizing it on a conscious level. Critics, on the other hand, engage the story as moral fable and from an adult perspective this is a book children should read.

Conclusion

The titles that children have selected most often as state book award winners support much of the research on children's reading interests. Many of the books are not

the same ones critics or reviewers or even interested adults would choose as literary accomplishments. However, some of these books are among the best that children's literature has to offer. When examining the list of those books that have won four awards or more, it becomes clear that children are connecting with them in one or more ways, either through verbally engaging language, identification with a character or with a theme that is developmentally appropriate to the children in the middle childhood years, or both. What is troubling about the list of state book award winners is what is not found – historical fiction, books set in other cultures, and books featuring minority characters.

Crago (1993) like Schlager (1978) identified the popularity of a narrative with its accessibility and developmentally appropriate themes as exhibiting the lowest common denominator, "meaning created by individuals in response to a text [that] largely coincides with meanings promoted and validated by the whole culture in which that individual lives" (p. 279). Nodelman (1981) suggested that good writing for children is often subversive in that it draws the child into the wider world and suggests to the child that "other people are as interesting in their way as he is himself in his" (p. 184).

As elementary age children move into their middle school years and beyond, they will encounter increasingly sophisticated texts and will be expected to reflect on literature which does not provide the easy identification and accessibility of the popular elementary books. The book award nominees in most states provide a wide range of literature experiences in terms of theme, genre, and interest. In promoting the state book award nominees through the library media center program, it is incumbent upon the teachers and library media specialists to promote a wider and deeper reading of the nominee list, particularly for the fluent and increasingly sophisticated reader. This might be accomplished by incorporating some of the following suggestions:

- Teachers and library media specialists should read the nominees
- Present booktalks on the historical fiction, multicultural, and minority nominees
- Link historical fiction with curricular areas in collaboration with teachers
- Use the WWW to stimulate interest in the historical and cultural background necessary for enjoyment of these books
- Encourage use of the materials and activities that are suggested by the state award nominating committee
- Engage in literary discourse with students both informally and through literature circles and book clubs

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APPENDIX A

Children's Literature Cited in Text

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